THE SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF HAMILTON AND DISTRICT

TRENDS AND FORECASTS

Hamilton-Wentworth

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

INTRODUCTION

Estimating the prevalence of violence against women in a population is made difficult by a number of factors -

1) a lack of empirical evidence on the subject;
2) a high degree of under-reported actual occurrences to police and helping organizations;
3) the degree of under-reporting that is anticipated in population surveys because of the very traumatic and personal nature of many occurrences.

A number of attempts have been made, however, to develop realistic estimates. In this issue of Trends and Forecasts, the most "commonly accepted" estimates are applied to local population figures to yield estimates of the number of victims in our local population.

Given the increasing level of concern about violence against women, a number of important developments have occurred in Hamilton-Wentworth, as components of an overall community response to the problem. A number of these recent developments are presented.

SEXUAL ASSAULTS

According to the 1985 factsheet from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women entitled "Sexual Assault", one in every seventeen women is sexually assaulted, involving forced sexual intercourse, at some time in their life. The application of this rate to the local population would suggest that 10,561 have been the victims of sexual assault in Hamilton-Wentworth.

Utilizing a broader definition of "unwanted sexual acts" (ranging from exposure to rape), Badgely (1984) estimated that 1 in 2 females have experienced such acts at some point in their lives. Eighty percent of these "unwanted" acts occurred in childhood.

If these figures are applied to the current population of the Region, an estimated 86,160 adult females have been the victims of "unwanted sexual acts". Approximately 71,800 were victims during dhildhood.

DOMESTIC ASSAULTS

A 1980 report by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women entitled "Wife Battering in Canada", reported that one in ten women have been physically abused by a spouse at some point in their adult life. This estimate is still utilized as the "standard estimate" of the incidence of the problem in Canada.

If this rate is applied to the married, divorced and separated female population in Hamilton-Wentworth, it yields an estimate of 12,980 as the number of females who have been abused on at least one occasion. The results of a 1982 Canadian Urban Victimization Survey reported that approximately half of the victims of spousal abuse are abused on more than one occasion - usually on a regular and relatively frequent basis. This would suggest that approximately 6,490 females in Hamilton-Wentworth have been the victims of "chronic" abuse.

HOW MANY INCIDENTS CAN WE EXPECT IN 1990

Estimating the annual incidence of sexual and domestic assaults is even more difficult than estimating the overall prevalence of victims in the general population. Based on a variety of sources, however, the Social Planning and Research Council (S.P.R.C.) has developed the following estimates:

1) Even the most conservative estimate of incidence suggests that over 3,000 females of all ages in Hamilton-Wentworth will be the victims of sexual violence in the course of a 12 month period. The number could be as high as 6,000 to 7,000 and at least one-third of these victims will probably be under the age of 16.

2) With respect to physical violence, it would appear to be reasonable to expect that at least 2,000 to 3,000 females of all ages will be physically abused by males and, again, the number could be double that estimate.

Information pertaining to the derivation of these estimates is available from the S.P.R.C.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

SEXUAL ASSAULT

In January 1990, the Province of Ontario announced new funding of 28.8 million dollars over five years to address the problem of sexual assault. The largest share of the new funding (24 million) will go to support services to victims - sexual assault centres, hospitals and community agencies. Another 2.4 million will be utilized to improve support to victims during the court process and 1.7 million will be used for public education and awareness.

Locally, these initiatives will provide our Sexual Assault Centre with a stabilized funding base and a full-time group co-ordinator to help reduce the Centre's growing waiting list.

CHILD ABUSE

The escalation in reported cases of child abuse, coupled with only inflationary increases in funding, have caused our local Children's Aid Societies to concentrate a growing proportion of their resources on the abuse allegations. This, in turn, has resulted in a decrease in resources allocated to longer term support programs. Of particular concern are support services to adolescents in care of the Societies. The two Children's Aid Societies are currently working together to develop special initiatives for this group.

As a result of growing concerns about the service system's ability to respond to the growing incidence of sexual abuse cases, the Association of Agencies for Treatment and Development has established a Sexual Abuse Task Force for the purpose of developing a co-ordinated community response to this problem.

VICTIMS SERVICES

A local Victims Services Task Force has developed a proposal to develop a Victims Services Program in Hamilton-Wentworth which will work with the Regional Police to provide immediate support and referral to victims of crime. The Regional Municipality has agreed to provide one-third of the funding for this initiative and the Task Force is now seeking additional funding from other sources.

FAMILY VIOLENCE CURRICULUM PROJECT

The Community Child Abuse Council of Hamilton-Wentworth is in the process of developing a curriculum-based Preventative Family Violence education program for use in elementary and secondary schools.

SOURCES

Badgely, R.F. Sexual Offences Against Children, Ottawa, Government of Canada Publishing Centre (1984)

Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Wife Battering in Canada, Ottawa, 1980

Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Sexual Assault, Ottawa, 1985